

## **Town Historian Report 2020-2025**

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### **Becoming Town Historian**

In 2020 at the end of the Town's COVID limited Bicentennial Committee's Meeting the Chairman and Town Historian John Woodward asked if I would be willing to take over as Town Historian. After some thought, I indicated an interest and was subsequently appointed by the Town Board starting January 2021. For the past 4-5 years a variety of activities have taken place related to Rotterdam's history in the position I accepted. This report summarizes key activities and concerns.

- Celebrating Rotterdam's Natural and Cultural Heritage
- Donations of Local Materials and Collections
- Public Education: Display Cases and Presentations
- Populating the New Historian's Page on the Town's Web Site
- Review of Rotterdam's Historic Files & Space Needs
- Forming a Volunteer Network for Rotterdam History

### **Celebrating Rotterdam's Natural and Cultural Heritage**

The Bicentennial focused the attention of a handful of volunteers to come together to plan activities that could help the public celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Town. The Committee chaired by historian John Woodward proposed activities starting in the Spring of 2020. The list included: an update of the Rotterdam Story booklet that was available during the 1976 National Bicentennial, a logo contest involving the art students in the high schools was planned for T-shirts, coffee cups and related decoration, the planting of 200 trees, crafting a local beer, applying for a historic marker for the Plotterkill Aqueduct, the writing the musical score for a Rotterdam song, a cross-town walk with a Bicentennial hiking patch for completers, intramural Fire Department competitions, renewal of the infamous 1976 Rotterdam and Glenville rope-pull across the Mohawk, and a Bicentennial parade with Colonial costuming. Alas, COVID visited Rotterdam and the rest of the country in March, 2020 forcing many of the planned events to be cancelled. Activities that were

halted include the 1820-1920 history booklet, song, Fire Department competitions, cross river rope pull and parade. They were cancelled due to COVID distancing restrictions. Five other events used COVID mask and distancing protocols and included:

### **Logo Contest**

A logo contest was completed by a dozen high school artists. A logo design from each of the high schools were chosen by the committee as winners. The designs were submitted to a graphic art company for printing and the winners were acknowledged at a meeting of the Town Board. Unfortunately, the logo designs were deemed too complex to reproduce on shirts and ceramic objects, so orders were not placed.

### **Tree Planting**

Two hundred bare root seedlings, 100 Red Oak and 100 Black Walnut trees were ordered from the Saratoga Tree Nursery for planting by Rotterdam residents. During April trees and planting instructions were provided to residents who drove by a stand in the Town Hall parking lot. About 175 residents were given bare root seedling trees and plantings were completed. Some replacement trees were given to residents who claimed the trees were not alive. Anonymous donations covered the cost of the trees.

### **Crafting A Heritage Beer**

The Back Barn Brewery in Delanson, NY agreed to produce a craft beer for the Bicentennial. Colonial aged hops (Heritage) were obtained from a farm in Cherry Valley. A pilsner beer using the Heritage hops was brewed in May and dubbed Heritage 1820. A logo was designed to use as a coaster and beer can label. We combined the Rotterdam windmill symbol and pilsner glass body making an attractive design (see below). It was used by the Back Barn Brewery to promote Heritage Beer. Members of the Town Board enjoyed a tasting event at the Back Barn to promote the beer. The press was invited and articles appeared in local newspapers featuring the back story of Rotterdam's Bicentennial and the beer that was brewed.

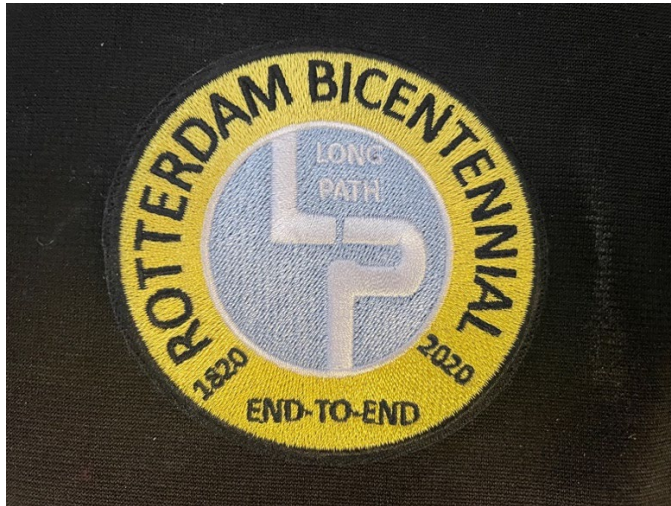
Local restaurants were encouraged to put “Heritage 1820” beer on tap during the summer of 2020.



### **Bicentennial Hike**

The Long Path of New York (1931) was designed to celebrate New York’s eastern highlands. It starts at the 175<sup>th</sup> St. subway stop in NYC and ends 550 miles later atop Whiteface Mountain at the northern edge of the Adirondacks. The Long Path (LP) crosses the Town of Rotterdam from South to North following the Red and Yellow Trails in the Almy D Coggeshall Plotterkill Preserve. The Bicentennial challenge was to have hikers earn an “End-to End” patch by completing the 5 mile hike across the Town. Logbooks were placed at the start and end of the Long Path inside kiosks that were constructed by the Rotterdam Carpentry Shop. The logbooks were monitored periodically to validate the completion by hikers. A three-inch diameter hiking patch was designed and awarded to hikers who completed the hike. The patch included the LP logo surrounded by “Rotterdam Bicentennial 1820-2020 and End-to-End” (See photo). Near the north end of the LP route across from Kiwanis Park is the Hungry Chicken, a wayside café. The owner agreed to give a “Long Path Sundae” free to any Bicentennial Hike completer. 143 persons

completed the hike and received a hiking patch. The New York/New Jersey Trail Conference maintains and administers the LP. The NY/NJ Trail Conference Board endorsed the Rotterdam Bicentennial Hike Project and approved the use of the LP logo in the patch below.



### **Aqueduct Historical Sign**

The sign highlights the enlarged Erie Canal aqueduct (1840) that carried the canal across the Plotterkill. It was installed in Kiwanis Park on the Empire State Trail hike/bike path, the product of Nancy Papish's successful application to the William Pomeroy Grant program.

### **Public Education**

#### **2024 Display Case Exhibit: Yantaputchaberg – New York's First Alpine Ski Site**

The most prominent geological feature in the 130-mile-long Mohawk Valley corridor is Yantaputchaberg – it is the highest mountain in the valley and dominates the Rotterdam Hills in the western part of town. Yantaputchaberg is the Dutch name given to this 1,300' mountain – recognizing early Dutch farmer Jan Mabee's (Yanta) wood lot (putcha) mountain (berg). The Mabee farm has become the highly acclaimed historic site run by the Schenectady County Historical Society.

In the 1930s the Schenectady Wintersports Club leased the property and built ski trails and modifying their ski equipment to enable high speed downhill turns. They clamped ski boots using metal and leather bindings and experimented with metal edges on the bottoms of their skis. The Club petitioned residents to support chartering trains to take them to snowy destinations. Their efforts led to the first of many Snow Trains that went from Schenectady to North Creek to ski on trails the Club helped build on Gore Mountain. In 1933, in the interest of ensuring ski safety, Club member, nurse Lois Perret, formed the first ski patrol in the country. For the next 5 years Snow Trains transported thousands of skiers to enjoy the “Ride Up and Slide Down” program centered on skiing around North Creek. In 1935 a rope tow was installed at the North Creek Village Ski Bowl to complement the system of truck transportation to the trailhead of the 4+ mile long network of trails. In 1964 Gore Mountain, and then in 1981 the Olympic Regional Development Authority became established adding both Whiteface Mountain and Bellayre Ski Resorts as the three premier ski centers of the state. In addition to these state-run facilities, dozens of private ski areas developed after WWII. It is important to remember that the innovative activities of skiers on Rotterdam’s Yantaputchaberg in the 1930s is thought to have played a key role in stimulating the multimillion-dollar ski industry in New York.

#### Skiing story highlights:

- Applied to the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to designate Yantaputchaberg as a National & State Historic Site (Denied, October 2024)
- Exhibit: Yantaputchaberg – Skis, Bindings, Poles, Petitions, Photos of Early Skiing, Trails, Racing, Trains
- Exhibit: Schenectady’s Women of Winter -- Education Pioneer Freddie Anderson and Ski Patrol Pioneer Lois Perret, RN
- Powerpoint Talks 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Snow Trains 1934-2024, Tannery Pond, North Creek, NY and Wolf Hollow Brewery, Glenville, NY
  - March 4<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> How Skiing Came to North Creek

- March 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Schenectady's Women of Winter
- Article: Winter Issue of SnoPro -- Professional Ski Instructors of America: "The 1933 Ski Patrol of the Schenectady Wintersports Club"
- YouTube TV "Alpine Skiing on Yantaputchaberg in the 1930s" **History on the Road** hosted by Don Rittner and Justyna Kostec (Forthcoming 2025)
- Historic Sign "1<sup>st</sup> Alpine Skiing in NY" by Catskill Casting
  - To be installed on Crawford Road (Summer 2025)
  - Sponsored by the Schenectady Wintersports Club

### **2025 Display Case Exhibit: 1825-2025 Anniversary of the Erie Canal**

The current exhibit was curated by Rotterdam resident Nancy Papish. She created an eight-panel display of books, pictures, and text tracing transportation on NY State waterways from the time of New York's Indigenous People and the fur trade, through pre-Erie Canal-Mohawk River improvements and the three versions of the Erie Canal. Some of the material displayed is from research used for creating the historical marker grant application to the William Pomeroy Foundation which was completed in 2020. The exhibit is in two cases on the second floor of the town Hall and will remain for the entire year.

Article: "The 1840 Plotter Kill Aqueduct" Nancy H. Papish  
 Bottoming Out: The Canal Society of New York State Vol. No 75  
 Winter/Spring 2024 Pp 34-38.

### **Webinar Presentations**

#### **Union College Lifelong Learning (UCALL)**

2022 "That Place Beyond the Pine Plains:  
 Schenectady County Local Historian's View"

James M Schaefer, -- Geologic-Prehistoric-European Influences

2023 "Vocation and Avocation of Paul A. Schaefer"

James M Schaefer -- Dutch Neocolonial House Design/Construction and Protection of the Forever Wild Cause in the NY State Constitution in the Adirondack Park"

## **Donations of Local Materials and Collections**

Periodically the Town Historian is contacted by residents who wish to donate objects, collections, photos, dairies and related materials about people, places and things in Rotterdam's past.

Materials are acknowledged and stored in boxes for display or storage in the Town.

- Anonymous resident left a Rotterdam Memorial Plate at Town Hall – it been placed in Historical Materials Box for Display and Storage
- Accepted donation of Schenectady Ski School records, photos and related ski instruction materials by the family of Henry and Freddie Anderson. Acknowledged and stored in boxes.
  - 8mm, 16mm, DVD disks of skiing by family members including video of Freddie Anderson skiing at Whiteface Mtn. at age 95
  - Framed photos and signs from Schenectady Ski School 1967-2013 @ Maple Ski Ridge, Rotterdam, NY
  - Medals and award of Freddie Anderson including her 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary pin from the Professional Ski Instructors of America
- Accepted donation of annual diaries of George and Elmer Hunt, south Rotterdam farmers from 1872-1907 from Anthony Cerrone of Rotterdam
- Accepted donation of scrapbooks, photos and certificates about Dinny Ritchie (Anthony J. Ranucci) Semi-professional Boxer from Rotterdam from Joyce Ranucci of Voorheesville, NY
  - Nominated Dinny Richie (Anthony J Ranucci) to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, Canastota, NY
- Accepted donation of toll house records and legal papers of Judge Pierson of Rotterdam (1865-1877) from David Newkirk of Gloversville, NY
  - Historian's Page paper "Rotterdam's Broadway Toll House"
- Accepted donation of the Vedder Family file with documentation of family genealogy from 1660 to 1973, including the story of the grass-roots protest regarding the building of the Wilmorite mall

involving the historic Vedder Family Cemetery, David Campbell's mansion and burial site of Indigenous People. The construction of the mall threatened to destroy these historic sites. Given by Kenneth Rau of Altamont, NY

- Accepted 30 copies of the 1866 Map of Rotterdam (13" x 14") page 57 of an unknown Gazetteer of New York Towns from Beverly Clark, Scotia, Town Historian. The map has detailed location of the Erie Canal, home, roads, railroads and streams. The map has been useful in finding place names and stream locations for current research on history papers and the Natural Resources Inventory Project of 2025.

### **Historian's Page -- Rotterdam Town web site**

During 2024 when the Town revised the design and content of its web site, the Historian's Page was created.

Papers and photos posted on the Historian's Page:

- The History of Schenectady and Towns by JH French
- Footnotes to JH French's History of Schenectady and Towns
- Tributaries of the Mohawk & Hudson Rivers in Rotterdam
- Rotterdam: The Home of Cloud Seeding
- Ancient Lake Albany Beaches in Rotterdam
- Rotterdam's Broadway Hill Toll House
- Photos of Iroquois Pottery & Arrowheads from Rotterdam
- Photos of Lake Albany Sand Strata in Rotterdam

### **Review of Rotterdam's Historic Files & Space Needs**

Rotterdam tax and property assessment files, town meeting tapes and minutes have been stored in rooms and file cabinets on the second and third floors of the Town. To date, only a cursory review has been made of the existing photos, document holdings, and historical archives of the Town. After an initial assessment, a small group of volunteers will be selected to sort through a room full of boxes at the Senior Center. The condition and potential usefulness of these past files will be considered as

culling begins. The final volume of documents will be compiled including boxes of materials elsewhere. An estimate of space requirements will be shared with the Supervisor, along with a proposal for safe storage.

### **Potential of Forming a Rotterdam Historical Society**

Past town historians in Rotterdam have been appointed and have operated alone with little or no supervision or stated expectations from the Town Board. A \$500 annual stipend is provided. No reports have been filed by past historians. Former historians have followed their own interests to generate activity. For example, Mr. Whelan, from Rotterdam Junction, had an interest and expertise in railroad history. Many of his records, photos and related railroad history documents were damaged in the floods caused by Hurricane Irene. Many of the water damaged boxes have been stored at the Senior Citizens Center. Immediate past historian, John Woodward, was interested in Rotterdam's role in County affairs and organized forums for historic presentations – he spearheaded the 2020 Bicentennial Committee with plans that were hampered by the COVID pandemic. John continues to serve as the Assistant Schenectady County Historian.

I have collaborated with historians from several towns in Schenectady County in several collaborative presentations and meeting. Niskayuna and Duanesburg have formal organizations concerned with preserving their town's history. I have sought the advice of Bill Buell, the County Historian, to learn about the procedures of Town Historic Societies. After a review, of the approaches, a recommendation will be made to the Town Supervisor regarding what might be accomplished with further organizing of a volunteer group interested in Rotterdam's history.